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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 DAMASCUS 000202

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SUBJECT: SYRIA ELECTIONS UPDATE: SIX WEEKS FROM NATIONAL  
ASSEMBLY BALLOTING

REF: A. DAMASCUS 088

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 046

[1](#)C. 05 DAMASCUS 2943

[1](#)D. 05 DAMASCUS 3409

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: Less than two months from expected Syrian National Assembly Elections, the official election date has yet to be announced. Syrians seem largely uninterested in the process because they have little faith that representatives will take into account their interests, according to contacts. Officially sanctioned parties from the National Progressive Front, led by the Ba'ath Party, are guaranteed a majority of all seats in the Parliament. Even most of the so-called "independents" expected to run for Parliament have close ties to the Syrian regime. Syria's opposition parties are weak and under intense scrutiny by Syrian security services; most parties, including the Damascus Declaration group, have decided not to field candidates. Syrian contacts say that any efforts by domestic political organizations to conduct election monitoring would be viewed by the SARG and its security services with deep suspicion and hostility, particularly given the December 19 Time magazine story about U.S. sponsored election monitoring in Syria. As of yet, we have not heard of international plans to monitor any of the three sets of elections scheduled to be held this year in Syria. For the European Commission and other outside groups, the SARG must officially request monitoring. The short and, to date, opaque run-up to the elections process, which takes place during a time of an intensified SARG crackdown, deliberately hinders locally generated criticism of the electoral process or its outcome. In addition to the Department's 2007 Syrian Elections Media Implementation Plan, Post recommends talking points in para 15 that can be deployed in the run-up to the elections and that might resonate with the Syrian public and put the regime on the defensive. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Only six weeks from the likely Syrian National Assembly elections, the official election date has yet to be announced. Some contacts have told us the election campaigning will start around March 15, with the elections taking place between April 10-20. Election rules prevent potential candidates from beginning to campaign (although we have heard private discussion and even some regional press speculation about potential "candidate lists" for

government-backed "independents" in Damascus city).

13. (C) Syrians seem largely unaware or interested in the upcoming elections because they have little faith that representatives will ensure that future legislation takes into account their interests, according to a number of our contacts. In a startling official expression of the sad state of electoral politics, an article in an official Syrian newspaper, Al-Thawra, reported that Syrians are not interested in running or voting in parliamentary (or municipal elections) because government institutions do not play their constitutional roles, due to individual incompetence or greed but also because many legislative members "awaited instructions from the parties that nominated them and did not take the initiative." The author urged the need for leaders of the officially-sanctioned National Progressive Front (NPF) to nominate the most qualified candidates for office. (Comment: Actually, as is usually the case with quasi-sanctioned political and economic criticism in Syria, the critic emphasizes the least important aspects of the problem. He focuses on issues attributable to personal foibles, rather than to systemic problems or to the role of the regime itself, distracting readers from the underlying problems linked to lack of freedom and regime-emasculated institutions. Nevertheless, Thawra is an official organ and the fact of the criticism is interesting. End Comment.)

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THE NPF AND OTHER POSSIBLE CANDIDATES  
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14. (C) Past elections have showed that NPF parties, which includes and is headed by the official Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, always control the 167 seats needed for absolute majority of the 250-member Parliament, while non-NPF,

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"independent" candidates hold up to 83 legislative seats (as reported in ref A). The NPF is a coalition of nine officially sanctioned parties. The full breakdown of the coalition's current control of government is listed below:

- Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (135 seats or 54 percent) (19 ministers or 63 percent)
- Arab Socialist Union Party (7 seats); (no minister)
- Syrian Communist Party - Yusuf al-Faysal's wing (4 seats) (1 minister)
- Syrian Communist Party - Farha Bakdash's wing (4 seats) (1 minister of state without a portfolio)
- Socialist Unionists Party (7 seats) (1 minister)
- Arab Socialist Movement (4 seats) (one minister of state without a portfolio)
- Democratic Socialist Unionist Party (4 seats) (1 minister of state without a portfolio)
- National Pledge Party (2 seats) (1 minister of state for Red Crescent Affairs)
- Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (no seats) (1 minister of state without a portfolio)

(Note: The most recent Syrian cabinet of February 2006 includes seven independents among the 32 ministers. End Note.)

15. (C) In addition to the NPF parties, there are some 20 opposition parties in Syria, which are tolerated to varying degrees by the SARG as long as they do not challenge its authority and the political status quo. Five of the parties are semi-united and belong to a group called the National Democratic Front (NDF). The head of one of those parties, Riad al-Turk, told A/DCM in January that his Syrian Communist Party (one of several Communist parties in Syria) would boycott the elections, but that other opposition parties were considering participating as independents, including several Kurdish parties and another NDF party, the Democratic Arab Socialist Union (ref B). There would be little or no real

competition over the remaining seats for independents, with just a few rich businessmen jousting among themselves for spoils and prestige, since the regime would likely circulate official and "unofficial lists" that would signal to voters (and potential candidates) the approved "independents," Turk asserted.

¶6. (C) In that category of "independents," we have heard of two possible lists for Damascus. The first six-person list is headed by businessman and current Damascus MP Hashem Akkad, a close ally of Syrian Military Intelligence Chief Assef Shawkat, while the second five-person list is headed by fellow corrupt businessman and current MP Mohammad Hamsho, who has close ties to Maher al-Asad, brother of President Bashar al-Asad. (Note: Hamsho spent at least USD 800,000 to guarantee his 2003 election to the Assembly - ten times more than any other candidate for office in those elections, according to contacts.)

¶7. (C) We have heard from a few government critics who are considering plans to run as true independents, including a Damascus-based businessman who says his bid for office would stem from optimism that the UNIIIC investigation will bring down the Syrian government, creating opportunities for dramatic improvements in Syrian governance. (Note: This same businessman was a candidate in the 2003 Parliamentary elections before being arrested a day before the vote. He was never convicted but the arrest effectively torpedoed his election chances. End Note.) Separately, the head of the loose coalition of opposition elements known as the Damascus Declaration (DD) group, Riad Seif, had indicated earlier this year the group's preliminary decision to field independent candidates across Syria, but in a subsequent meeting Seif told A/DCM that the group now believed it would be too dangerous to do so. The group based its assessment on what it saw as an intensified crackdown on civil society and a willingness by the SARG to do whatever it took to prevent the opposition from exploiting the election to its own advantage.

Responding to a question from A/DCM, Seif, formerly an MP who spent almost five years in prison for his involvement in the 2000-2001 Damascus Spring movement, said that in recent months the SARG has started controlling him more closely than ever, posting security officials outside his office and home and scrutinizing his and other DD members' phone calls and e-mails as a means of discovering and foiling attempts to

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meet and plan opposition election activities.

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ATMOSPHERICS  
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¶8. (C) This anticipated crackdown on opposition attempts to participate in, or otherwise use the elections to score political points, follows years of discussion about potential political reform. This discussion, which began after President Bashar al-Asad's July 2000 accession to the presidency. For example, during the summer of 2000, Syria saw the emergence of the Damascus Spring movement that included increased social and political debate and activities, which continued through autumn 2001 when the SARG cracked down on its organizers, jailing the most prominent of them.

¶9. (C) Despite the crackdown, Asad continued to voice support for political and economic reforms in Syria, as he did at the opening of the long-awaited 10th Ba'ath Party Regional Congress in June 2005 (ref C). The Congress ended with an announcement of a new, smaller Regional Command (the most powerful decision-making body in Syria) that excluded long-time hard-liner and just-resigned Vice-President Abdul Halid Khaddam, as well as a package of recommendations including a request that the SARG "review" the emergency law, allow for new political parties, and undertake a series of economic reforms to improve the investment climate, and limit

corruption and waste (ref D). Almost two years later, the SARG has accomplished a handful of modest economic reforms, but the review of the emergency law "is not on the table now" and the political parties law remains on hold until "circumstances permit it," according to the Arabic daily Al-Hayat quoting Asad earlier this month at a meeting of the Ba'ath Party Central Committee.

¶10. (C) The 2007 National Assembly elections will occur in a different political climate than that of the 2003 parliamentary vote. Unlike in 2003, the SARG finds itself internationally isolated and under the shadow of a UN-led investigation into the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri, which has suggested a possible Syrian role in the killing. As a result of these outside pressures, the SARG has in turn sought to crack down on internal dissent, according to a range of our contacts. Many prominent government critics, such as Syrian intellectual Michel Kilo and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, remain in detention awaiting trial after their arrest in mid-2006 for signing the Damascus-Beirut Declaration that proposed steps to normalize Syria-Lebanon relations. Reportedly, the SARG has also issued in the last year an estimated 500 travel bans on human rights and civil society activists, requiring explicit prior permission for travel from intelligence services, according to our contacts. Some activists seek the required permission for travel, while others have told us that they prefer no travel to seeking permission from the security services.

¶11. (C) Independent MP for Damascus, Basel Dahdouh (please protect), told A/DCM the security services started whisper campaigns in early February against potential independents (including current MPs) that they consider undesirable. Although this was done in previous elections, it started only two to three weeks before the voting, not several months before. Dahdouh also remarked that in previous run-ups to elections, dating as far back as the 1990's, there was much more excitement about running and about the prospects of holding elective office, despite the limited powers of the Assembly. This year, because of the sustained SARG crackdown on civil society and all notions of public dissent in the past year, potential independents are more wary and wonder, given the constraints and risks, whether pursuing office is worth the effort (and the expense), said Dahdouh. Nonetheless, he expected most current independent MPs to run for re-election, with two-thirds of them likely to be re-elected. He predicted a much bigger turnover among the Ba'athist and NPF candidates with at least half of them likely to be fresh faces.

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PROSPECTS FOR ELECTION MONITORING  
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¶12. (C) In this context, Syrian contacts say that any efforts by domestic political organizations to conduct election monitoring would be viewed by the SARG and its security services with deep suspicion and hostility, particularly given the December 19 Time magazine story, which fueled the SARG's fears of outside meddling in the elections. Ammar Qurabi, head of the National Organization of Human Rights (NOHR), reported an unconfirmed rumor he heard regarding the brief detention in February of Kurdish student activist Kamal Sheikho, who reportedly received Brookings Institute money through Washington-based Syrian dissident Ammar Abdulhamid to fund election-related activities in Syria during the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. Qurabi said that Abdulhamid was going to use his organization, Ikhtilaf al-Thawra (Arabic for the Anti-Revolution and a play on the Ba'ath Party's description of its rise to power as "the Revolution"), to funnel money to Sheikho to use in election monitoring. Sheikho's involvement with U.S.-based dissident groups is the reason for Sheikho's detention, Qurabi

speculated.

¶13. (C) ELECTION MONITORING: As of yet, we have not heard of international plans to monitor any of the three sets of elections scheduled to be held in Syria, including the National Assembly polling. European Commission contacts tell us that a range of visiting European parliamentarians raised the possibility of National Assembly election monitoring during meetings with Syrian officials in late 2006 but that the Syrians did not respond. (Note: According to EC rules, the host country must officially request election monitoring before it can take place and there are no indications that the SARG intends to do so, according to the EC's acting representative in Damascus. End Note.) Separately, the visiting parliamentarians indicated that they might try to visit Syria at the same time that balloting was taking place, but so far there have been no indications of follow-up by delegation members, the representative told us.

¶14. (C) We believe some Western embassies may also attempt to carry out informal election monitoring, or at least visits to polling places on the 1.5 days of voting for the National Assembly. Canadian diplomats have asserted in diplomatic settings that they would like to attempt informal monitoring to demonstrate to the SARG international interest in the process and a desire to hold the SARG to its word of free and fair elections. Separately, a German diplomat told us this week that they are likely to go out and survey polling stations during balloting but are unlikely to coordinate such efforts with missions from other EU member states. The German Ambassador did mention the idea, however, in a late January meeting with Syria's FM Walid Mu'allim, who promised to get back to him about the idea but never did, according to a German diplomat.

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (S/NF) The short and opaque elections process, which so far has elicited little interest from the general Syrian public, and takes place during a time of an intensified SARG crackdown, deliberately hinders criticism of the electoral process or its outcome. Contacts such as Seif insist that international criticism should focus on the lack of transparency in the process and the absence of tangible results for the Syrian people, who are most concerned about daily survival. Seif added that turmoil in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq has caused the majority of Syrians to associate democracy with chaos and political violence in ways that have polluted discussions of democratization in Syria. Nonetheless, we assess that the regime remains vulnerable to criticism about the lack of democracy and the privileged status of the Ba'ath Party. In the run-up to the elections and in addition to the Department's 2007 Syrian Elections Media Implementation Plan aimed at increasing reporting on the process, Post recommends the following talking points:

-- While the Syrian government and its ruling Ba'ath Party periodically go through the motions of holding elections, the Asad regime uses authoritarian rule by Emergency Law, its all-powerful security forces and its monopoly control over the political process, to render such elections meaningless.

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-- The Syrian Constitution and the elections process heavily favor the domination of the ruling Ba'ath Party and National Progressive Front in the National Assembly.

-- The U.S. is deeply concerned about the upcoming parliamentary elections, given the complete absence of the basic political reforms that Asad has repeatedly promised since he took power, including a new elections law.

-- The Syrian people have the right to elect parliamentary

representatives who are able and willing to fight corruption.

We urge the Syrian government to support the holding of free and fair elections, and to allow international and domestic monitors to observe elections.

-- Additionally, the Constitution guarantees that only a Ba'ath Party representative will be nominated for the presidential plebiscite.

-- Syrian legislative representatives have so far failed to deliver on basic responsibilities such as ensuring basic education and fighting unemployment and corruption. UNESCO estimates that as of 2004 only 58 percent of all of Syria's children attend secondary school, Official and private sources believe that unemployment in Syria ranges between 9.5 and 20 percent.

CORBIN